

*A Reconstruction of an “Officially Expunged”
Kingdom in Colonial South India:
Panjalamkurinchi through Memory and
Archaeology*



RAMAN SEYLON

INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF A LOST
KINGDOM IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SOUTH INDIA

IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY Panjalamkurinchi Palayam was a medium-sized poligar polity that consisted of nine *mahanums* (territorial divisions), which cumulatively had 90 villages. The name Panjalamkurinchi is also the name of the largest *mahanum* as well as its principal village. The Panjalamkurinchi Palayam was ruled by the military household of Kattabomma Nayakar, who held sway over the eastern part of Tinnevely district, the veritable rice basket of Tamil country. The Tamil country military households were called the “southern poligars” in the East India Company records. In order to fully place Panjalamkurinchi Palayam within regional politics, let us first look at the origins of the poligar system and how, in spite of their size, they came to play such a major role in the history of South India.

The origins of these poligar rajas can be traced to the frontier garrison commanders of the Vijayanagara Empire (1336–1616). The Vijayanagara Empire was extremely large and most troop movements took place overland on foot. This meant that the imperial armies could never patrol the entire region. Therefore, troops attached to local subsidiary rulers or frontier garrison commanders were important in providing security (Morrison 2001; Sinopoli 2000). The frontier garrison commanders were vested with the role of policing the peripheral areas to keep organized banditry and marauding tribal raiders at bay (Venkata Ramanayya 1935). During the Vijayanagar period, the peripheral hilly and forested areas were scattered with isolated settlements and pilgrimage cities that were traversed by secondary trade routes. The rich commercial traffic that flowed through them, along with their isolation and lush and hilly topography, made this terrain an ideal hiding place for organized robbers. They were also a source of easy pickings for

Raman Seylon is Assistant Professor of History at Bridgewater State College, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

marauding tribesmen and a base for the rebellious vassals who profited by both the plunder and the prestige derived from making the state seem impotent. The Vijayanagar rulers hoped to provide greater security for the pilgrims, merchants and settlers, and appointed a special breed of armed watchmen who came to be called *palegadu* and better known by its English equivalent, poligar. The early nineteenth-century English historian, Mark Wilks, believes that the term poligar had a restricted usage earlier, but by the mid-eighteenth century it had gained popularity among other classes of South Indian chieftains who were earlier referred to only by their caste titles (Wilks 1817).

The late nineteenth-century Anglican missionary-scholar Bishop Robert Caldwell, author of *Comparative Grammar of Dravidian Languages*, while extrapolating the etymology of the anglicized term poligar, notes "The Tamil name is *palaiyak-kara*, the literal meaning of which is the holder of a camp, secondly the holder of a barony on military tenure. But the English seem to have taken their name poligar, not from the Tamil *Palaiyakkara*, but from the Telugu *palegadu* or the Canarese *palegara*, the meaning of which is identical [gadu and gara are equivalent to kara]. In a like manner, the English had taken their word *pollam*, a poligar's holding, rather from the Telugu *Palam-u* rather than the Tamil *palayam*" (Caldwell 1982; Dua 1996).

Originally in Tamil Nadu, the title *palegadu* (as they were known in Telugu country) was given to the local commanders of military garrisons. They were subordinates to the Vijayanagar governors or Naiks, and wielded far greater power, authority, and prestige than any frontier watchmen. The political treatise of Vijayanagar's versatile ruler, Krishna-deva Raya, *Amuktamalyada*, also relates that those who later assumed the title of *palegadu* were initially appointed as *kavalgar*, "watchmen" or "guardians" (Venkata Ramanayya 1935). They were granted the right to raise earthen ramparts and to retain a small band of retainers, and they were granted revenue rights or *jagir* of one or two of the villages. Since they were chosen and nominated by the ruler they must have been directly responsible to him. The accounts of the British colonial revenue assessor and administrator Thomas Munro at the turn of the eighteenth century relayed firsthand accounts concerning the process of "poligarisation" by the head men, *kavalgar* soldiers, and renters of Bellary district in South India, a process which Munro had studied in great detail (Munro 1892).

In the early sixteenth century under the rule of the Madurai Nayaks (a Vijayanagara secondary state that ruled over southern Tamil country), the poligar rajas had broader military and revenue collecting responsibility. According to official Nayaka chronicles, there were 72 key bastions surrounding the central fort of Madurai, each under the command of a poligar raja line of defense network right across the Tamil country. They had the feudal obligation of supplying the center's forces with a fixed quota of troops, as well as functioning as supply depots for provisions.

The powers of the poligar rajas continued to increase throughout the Nayaka period and, by the end of the seventeenth century, some of the more dominant princes, such as the rajas of Ramnad, Sivaganga, and Pudukottai, had become virtual rulers, ruling large territories. Just below them were medium-sized military households of Panjalamkurinchi, Ettayapuram, and Sivagiri. State formation here was cyclical in character, with early phases analogous to the first three develop-

mental stages of Rajput states described by Richard Fox (1971) and the formation of successor states of the eighteenth century described by Stewart Gordon (1969, 1972). Essentially, the regional powers expanded to fill a power vacuum in trans-regional empires (Vijayanagara) and these, in turn, imploded into successor states (Madurai Nayaks), which in turn could also collapse, leaving the local powers without any political overlord. These local components, such as the poligar polities, steadily assumed greater military prowess, often at the expense of their weak neighbors or the feeble central state power to build themselves as regional powers. During this process the major poligar rajas also became heads of powerful military confederacies. Organizationally, the political structure of a poligar polity is a smaller and simplified or “involved” version of that of its immediate regional overlord in the manner of the Russian *matryoshka* dolls, and this makes their political transition to larger forms far smoother.

By 1736, Nayaka rule over Tamil country imploded in factional civil war among the ruling Nayaka households. The Tamil country then came nominally under the reign of the Nawab of Arcot. Technically serving as the Mughal regional governor and an official under the Nizam of Hyderabad (the Mughal governor of South India), the Nawab acted as an autonomous sovereign like his nominal overlord. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Nawab of Arcot was kept on his throne by the power of the British East India Company, mainly to frustrate the political ambitions of its main European rivals, the French, and to a lesser extent that of the Dutch East India Companies.

In order to get a full picture of the strategic political role played by the military household of Panjalamkurinchi in the latter part of the eighteenth century, it is necessary to examine Panjalamkurinchi's importance within the broader picture of European colonial rivalries after the fall of the Madurai Nayaks. During the second half of the eighteenth century, Panjalamkurinchi, being the most powerful Nayaka *palayam*, had tremendous military significance for all the secondary powers contesting for regional prominence. In the early 1780s, the Panjalamkurinchi poligar raja Jagaveera Kattabomma Nayakar (r. 1760–1790) and the Sivagiri poligar raja Varaguna Rama Pandian Sinnatambi made a military pact with the Dutch colonial government in Colombo, which was then in a state of war with the British East India Company. During his negotiations with the Dutch commandant at Tuticorin, Jagaveera Kattabomma Nayakar promised to win the support of all Tottiyar or Nayaka poligar rajas for the Dutch cause. He offered to recruit a large number of pikemen (peons) to assist the Dutch in expelling the British-Nawab garrison in the nearby fort of Palayamkottai, if he were provided with sufficient arms.

Moreover, he informed the commandant that by their oppression, the Nawab and the British had made themselves “a plague upon the populace and the whole country would cheerfully unite to drive them out” (Filipsky 1983). In the formal military treaty, the Dutch governor of Ceylon, Willem Falck, made raja Jagaveera Kattabomma Nayakar the “first poligar” of the Dutch East India Company. In expectation of conflict, the poligar raja repaired and strengthened his fortification, and collected sufficient ammunition and supplies for the main Dutch expeditionary force that was soon to land. The Dutch in turn provided the poligar raja with a shipment of small arms, artillery pieces, powder, and shells, along with ready cash, but these gestures proved largely symbolic and futile (Filipsky 1983). By this

time, the Dutch Company was in deep financial crisis. It had to cut back drastically on ventures deemed unproductive, while the British, with their ample resources from their rich Bengal possessions, were in a position to expand their power. The Dutch garrison, lacking sufficient men and materials, could only supply their poligar allies with weaponry, which was considered “only fit for ballast” (Filipsky 1983). But even with the fall of the Dutch base in Tuticorin in mid-February 1782, the hope and expectations raised by the Dutch promise took on a momentum of its own. Soon, an estimated 10,000 pikemen, led by the military houses of Panjalamkurinchi and Sivagiri, were up in arms trying to secure the Tinnevely countryside for their cause. This evoked a major military response by the British East India Company, who dispatched a large force under Colonel William Fullerton to subjugate both the “rebel” poligar rajas, and to firmly bring them under the Company’s orbit (Fullerton 1787).

By this time, the Nawab of Arcot’s de facto position as the ward of the British East India Company, along with his private vice involving a lavish, spendthrift lifestyle financed by loans from British lenders at exorbitant interest rates, made him highly vulnerable to the Company’s own aims and designs. Heavily in debt to his British creditors, the Nawab was unable to meet his financial treaty obligation with the East India Company. As a result, the Nawab was forced to cede the revenue-rich Tinnevely district, including areas ruled by his poligar vassals under the Company’s direct rule during the Company’s critical wars with Tippu Sultan’s Mysore. The continued resistance of the poligar rajas to the Company’s revenue demands, and their internecine wars against their rivals led to a number of further pacification campaigns in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The persistence of Panjalamkurinchi’s defiance under its new poligar raja, Jagaveera Rama Kattabomma Nayakar (a.k.a. Veerapandya Kattabomman in Tamil folklore), led to one of the bloodiest battles fought by the British East India Company army and the sequestration of the *palayam* in 1799 (Fortescue 1906; Kearns 1873). After another prolonged and costly conflict in 1801, the Company acted with vengeance. It expunged the name of Panjalamkurinchi from all its official references. The lands of that *palayam* were then partitioned and ceded to the neighboring loyal poligars rajas and the entire mud fort and the palace complex of Panjalamkurinchi was flattened and buried. As a final gesture, the fortress, which was known for its *kanchiyam* and *senchi* shrubs (whose blossoms were the customary awards for conquering heroes) was plowed under and sowed with salt and castor seeds. In a curious revision of Cato’s dictum in the Carnatic countryside, *delenda est Panjalamkurinchi*, this act also accorded with the traditional Hindu symbolism relating to an utter and humiliating defeat in which such destruction was deliberately pursued to make a powerful impression upon other rebellious military households.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the reminiscence of these events had long since receded in Tamil country, and in only the eastern part of the Tinnevely district did the deeds of this memorable poligar raja of Panjalamkurinchi remain alive in the form of popular folk songs. But here too, the raja Kattabomma Nayakar was one among the myriad of folk heroes of this part of rural Tamil country, and these songs and folk plays were performed exclusively by the economically marginalized members of his own Tottiya Nayakar caste. During the colonial period, public performance of Kattabomman drama (due to its anti-British content) was considered seditious and a punishable offense; as a result, most of

Tamil country remained oblivious to the actions of raja Kattabomma Nayakar until the eve of India’s independence, when the Nationalist’s struggle was reaching its climax. Curiously, at this juncture, most Tamils became aware of Panjalamkurinchi’s last poligar raja when he became the mascot of Tamil Nationalists in their efforts to carve out their own separate Tamil-speaking state, and to win recognition for Tamil contribution to the Indian freedom struggle. They ignored, or more likely were ignorant of, the fact that this poligar raja was an ethnic Telugu speaker, and his primary concerns even in the folkloric versions had to do with maximizing his revenues at the expense of his rivals and immediate neighbors, and very little to do with freedom struggle. The stirring dialogues of the Nationalists’ interpretation of the Kattabomman play (based on the Nayakar or Tottiyar Nayakar caste folk play), later immortalized in a 1961 blockbuster movie, assured a lasting place for this poligar raja in the heart of the Tamil-speaking population.

The colonial efforts to erase the memory of Panjalamkurinchi by the destruction and burial of this poligar raja’s palace should have offered archaeologists a valuable time capsule and a unique opportunity to study a working palayam under a semi-autonomous poligar raja. Unfortunately the very symbolism and the fame of Panjalamkurinchi in the politically charged atmosphere of the late 1960s seem to have undermined any methodical excavation. Instead, the 1970 digging of the site, according to the then director, was done in the “spirit of nationalistic fervor” and, as such, no survey maps were produced or excavation notes kept. The excavations were done without proper planning or sanction from the state administration. Instead, it was hastily undertaken to serve as a star attraction for the upcoming Kattabomman festival sponsored by the Tamil ultranationalist DMK party. The published version of the excavation appeared as a brief article in the December 1970 issue of the Tamil literary journal *Damilica*.

Although there are a number of recent books and articles written on the present-day remains of other major eighteenth-century poligars such as those of Ramnad, Sivaganga (Price 1991, 1996), Pudukattai (Dirks 1987; Punzo 1994), and Suprna Samasthana (Aruni 2003), these studies reflect changes that had taken place since the abolition of the poligar system in 1801. During the preceding two centuries, many of the key architectural features of these military households were demolished or irreversibly altered as the political role of its occupants changed from virtual rulers to *Zamindars*, or revenue collecting landed gentry. In this sense, Panjalamkurinchi’s frozen-in-time remains have a lot to offer us in understanding the architecture of a fully functioning military household of the late eighteenth century.

In 1992, I had the opportunity to lead a team to map the Panjalamkurinchi site. This work, along with two military siege maps unearthed in the state archives in Chennai, a recorded eyewitness account, personal interviews with present-day descendants of raja Kattabomma Nayakar’s household, and published memoirs of military officers who took part in the campaign allows us to create a more comprehensive picture of Panjalamkurinchi during its prime.

ARTISTIC RENDERINGS OF SOUTHERN POLIGARS

First, let us approach the study of these Southern poligar rajas from a fresh and altogether different angle, not through the textual interpretation of an armchair

historian or from the dry excavation reports of a professional archaeologist, but from the aesthetic sensibilities and artistic talents of two eighteenth-century English traveling painters in the South Indian countryside. On April 7, 1785, 15 years prior to the destruction of poligar raja's¹ forts in Tinnevely district, a relatively unknown, but talented, artist and printmaker, Thomas Daniell (1749–1840), the son of an innkeeper from Chertsey, Surrey, and his 15-year-old nephew William Daniell (1769–1837) set sail to Calcutta to seek their fortunes as other English artists before them. There they first earned their reputation by making detailed prints of the new imposing Georgian buildings in the British quarter of the city along the banks of the Hoogley River. The familiar prints were highly popular among Calcutta's growing English expatriate community. This also gave them sufficient funds for the ambitious undertaking of a grand tour of various parts of the subcontinent to make accurate drawings of landscape scenery to be used for future oils, watercolor paintings, or prints. They also sought the patronage of heads of major princely households such as the Nawab of Oudh. Unfortunately, a number of British painters had already visited the Nawab who, by now, had no desire for any further European-style art (Archer 1980). Failing to obtain commissions from the last large princely households, Daniell decided to cater to the English art market's recent fascination with exotic or novel landscape pictures (Archer 1980).

Around this time, a number of innovations in printmaking techniques made prints appear as fine as the best watercolors and an affordable form of decorative art. These high-quality reproductions were not out of place either in stately homes or in more humble surroundings and, therefore, had a wider market than either oils or watercolors. In his composition Daniell was influenced by fellow Surreyite Reverend William Gilpin's idea of the "picturesque." Gilpin had advocated a certain sensitivity in looking at nature, analogous to the manner in which a painter frames his objects. Gilpin himself had apparently borrowed the term from Alexander Pope's advice for the study of classics. Pope had urged the reader to see the descriptive or "picturesque" passages in Homer or in Virgil's *The Aeneid* as a form of "verbal painting."²

These new and complex aesthetic ideas that would sweep the English art world are reflected in Daniell's work. In his Indian picturesque compositions there is a tendency to include a great deal of intricate detail. These often include ruins, statues, with tropical foliage scattered about in the foreground. We also see human figures engaged in their most mundane tasks. It has been said that both the ruins and the humans in their daily chores are meant to remind us of the impermanence of the works of man or man's transience (Bayly 2001). The centerpiece is often an irregular and slowly decaying majestic piece of Indian architecture that again invokes the melancholy passage of time, bygone empires, or beauty in entropy. However, the Daniells, with an eye on the English market, carefully chose features that also had association with recent British military action. And with this objective, they ventured deep into the southern portion of what is today's Tamil Nadu. After facing a number of mishaps and misadventures by their hired help and at the hands of local bandits, their perseverance handsomely paid off. The scenery of the south was totally different, but just as beautiful as what they had earlier witnessed and sketched in Northern India.

Near the foothills of the western Ghats (what was then the district of Tinnevely) they saw abrupt granite outcrops, which Thomas noted in his journal, as “rising like rocky islands or islets arising out of the ocean” (Archer 1980). These made excellent defenses for the local military households, the western poligar rajas who had politically dominated this region. Out of two dozen sketches done in Tamil country, three scenes (Atur, Srivilliputtur, and Sivagiri) can be clearly identified as belonging to areas that were controlled by the poligar rajas. There is the conspicuous presence of the mud fort in the background or the foreground crowded by groups of armed pikemen either squatting or leaning on their weaponry. Wearing only a turban and loincloth, these scantily dressed, wiry Maravar caste pikemen were armed with their favorite weapon, one with which they displayed exceptional dexterity—the razor-sharp metal-tipped bamboo lances. These, along with swords, a few old muskets, and rusty small-caliber artillery pieces make up the entire range of weapons possessed by a typical poligar raja.

The poligar rajas’ lack of impressive armaments in relation to their princely adversaries was compensated for by their greater zeal, dedication, cunning, and stealth. Their pikemen were known for their fanatical devotion to their masters, at whose bequest they would willingly commit any violent act on the locals. Here, in these two paintings, the pikemen we see may well be more than mere stylistic devices; they may actually be policing the Daniells’ activities at the request of the poligar raja, who, at this period of political unrest and poligar rebellions, would naturally be suspicious of two trespassing Englishmen. These two pictures, which illustrate the poligar pikemen, are also the only surviving prints, that I am aware of, which depict this rural militia of the poligar rajas of Tinnevely. The Tinnevely poligar raja’s pikemen once numbered over 40,000 strong and were a standard fixture of rural Tamil country until the Company abolished them in the early 1800s. Right at the center of the painting entitled *Cheval-pettore* (Srivilliputtur) we see the fort of the poligar raja (*palayam*). These strongholds, which helped to maintain rural order, also encouraged traders and pilgrims by providing safe highways to those traveling the poligar kingdom. But their primary role was as a vital part of a network of rural defenses and the first line of military obstacles facing any invading army. Thomas Daniell was clearly aware of the military potential of this benign-looking mud structure, as he notes:

The ramparts of Cheval-pettore are formed of mud, a material very commonly used in India for the construction of walls for various purposes, though, to an European ear, it conveys no idea of stability. These earthen walls, nevertheless, baked in the fierce rays of an almost vertical sun, have been often put to a severe test by our artillery, and found equal, if not superior even to masonry. (Archer 1980)

The two Daniells then traveled south and arrived opposite the stockade of the poligar raja of Sivagiri, which lies hidden from view, wedged between a rocky dome bordered by a swift-flowing river on one side and steep hills on the other. The granite dome protects the raja’s fort against any direct cannonade. Daniell recorded in his journal his impressions of what was then the most formidable citadel among the poligars of the western part of Tinnevely district. Shevagurri (Sivagiri) was a small village, the residence of a poligar raja, tributary to the British government. Here Daniell notes:

The fort is . . . concealed behind the rocky eminence where the temple is placed a *choultnes* (travelers' inn) . . . the inhabitants of (Sivagiri) . . . chiefly rude mountaineers . . . and as usual much attached to their native hills, which afford them shelter both from their common enemies and those provoked by their insubordination. Should their chief choose at any time to resist the regular claims of government, he immediately flees to his hilly fastness, whence he is not easily dislodged: and his submission in such cases can only be enforced with much trouble and expense. (Archer 1980)

THE DESIGN AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A POLIGAR FORT: HISTORIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

These two paintings by Daniell, along with a sketch by Colonel Welsh, of the poligar fort of Panjalamkurinchi are the only drawings made of actual poligar raja's mud forts. Within a decade after Daniell made his sketches, all such poligar raja's mud forts in Tinnevely, as with the rest in the Company's possessions, were systematically pulled down, their physical remains were eroded or buried deep, most of their existence now long forgotten. This paucity of available field data in the form of physical remains also has discouraged scholarship. Although quite a number of modern historians have studied the formidable military architecture of the grand princes of South Asia,³ or the impressive stone forts of the major poligar rajas or "little kings," very few pay any attention to the rather benign and ugly mud forts of these petty poligar raja or military households. The limited data we have on the once numerous mud forts weakens our ability to understand a critical period in history, an era when the confederacies of such military households allied with, or vied against, the transient armies of major regional powers, were the de facto political authority over much of the Tamil countryside. Structurally, as I pointed out earlier, the petty poligar rajas were but a reduced version of the grand princes, as all had their courts, capitals, forts, and "palaces,"—but, of course, there was a world of difference between them in scale (Cohn 1962). It is therefore imperative for us to study the design and the construction of a poligar raja's fort, its geographical setting, along with its resources to understand the full extent of the military challenge posed by powerful mid-sized palayam such as Panjalamkurinchi. This is the focus of the rest of this article.

Generally speaking, this is difficult because, while the colonial records do have a plethora of late eighteenth-century communiqués concerning the poligar raja's, they were not done with an ethnographic eye and tend to focus primarily on the Company's military actions against them, reports of poligar raja led rebellions, or predatory violence and matters dealing with revenue collection. Fortunately, due to the momentous events that marked the fall of Panjalamkurinchi, we have a larger pool of historical tidbits of data from various sources, that when put together form a jigsaw capable of representing the larger picture of a late eighteenth-century poligar polity.

Despite the East India Company's efforts to obliterate the memory of Panjalamkurinchi (or perhaps because of it) there is a fair amount of cartographical and archival data concerning it. An example is a rare find in the form of an unpublished 1954 manuscript *Veerapandiya Kattabommanuvin Veera Charitram* by Subramania Durai (lineage head of a senior branch of Kattabomma Nayakar household) that contains the oral account by one Suppacone from Akilandapuram, a late

nineteenth-century Malayali, who claims to have visited this *palayam* as a youngster. These, together with recent archeological data, make it possible to reconstruct the physical geography of this military household with reasonable clarity and detail, more so than any others of this period.

Suppacone refers to himself as an “eyewitness.” But since his oral account was recorded only in 1881, some 80 years after the fort’s destruction, its accuracy, if not its credibility, may be called into question. However, the argument for its genuineness is strengthened by the modest tone of his narration and the precision and detail in the plotting of the sites. The expected minor variations in the reminiscences of an eyewitness in relation to the well-defined military maps also suggest that this narrator was unfamiliar with the existing published sources, in particular with the map in Welsh’s *Military Reminiscences* (1830). Contrary to the widely believed folkloric account of a formidable looking fortress, Suppacone relates that the poligar raja’s fortification was not only unattractive but also appeared benign. Suppacone’s description of the fortification, consisting predominantly of single-story mud and thatched dwellings with a few brick structures, is a far cry from the accounts of the tall shining palatial city celebrated in folk ballads. It is also revealed here that most of the structures within the poligar raja’s compound were less than a century old, in accordance with its relatively recent and remarkable rise in political power. Suppacone also focuses on the various aspects of the *palayam* that had been overlooked in colonial records. Some of what he relates is now verifiable in light of a recovered original siege map (Tamil Nadu Archives map no. 378; Fig. 1). This, in conjunction with the recent mapping of Kattabomma Nayakar’s excavated palace (Fig. 2), brings forth new information about this *palayam*.

Unlike the colonial accounts, which were strategic, Suppacone’s memoir was geographical. There was a brief sketch of the nearby village of Panjalamkurinchi, the principal settlement that gave its name to the entire *palayam*. This village was said to have been located away from the fort complex. The dominant caste was the Pillai or Vellala, the Tamil cultivators who had settled in the eastern side of the village. The Vellalas were also the region’s managerial caste, a fact documented in the *Kudumba charitirum* of the various major *palayams* in Tinnevely. In Panjalamkurinchi, this included the enterprising household of Sivasubramaniumpillai, the poligar’s chief *vakeel*. A testament of this caste’s overwhelming influence here is also cited in the Company’s revenue reports, which reveal that the Vellala cultivators, with the connivance of the poligar raja’s assessors, defrauded his treasury of nearly half the revenue dues from their fertile lands (Lushington 1800).

The lands between the village and the poligar raja’s fort were settled by the poligar’s functionaries (*parivaram*), Maravar (or Tevar) of the warrior caste, and the Reddies of the Telugu cultivator caste. In spite of this being the most powerful Nayakar *palayam*, Panjalamkurinchi’s militia was largely manned by the Maravar caste, whose members were widely employed as village *kaval-karas* throughout this region. A fair distance from the eastern side of the fort was a large Pakadai (or Chakiliya) settlement numbering some 300 households. Although the mere proximity of these Telugu leatherworkers was considered defiling to others, they had a close relationship with the ruling Tottiyar Nayakar, for whom they served in the capacity of trusted household servants or peons. At one point, there had been an untouchable (Pallar) settlement in proximity to the fort on its eastern

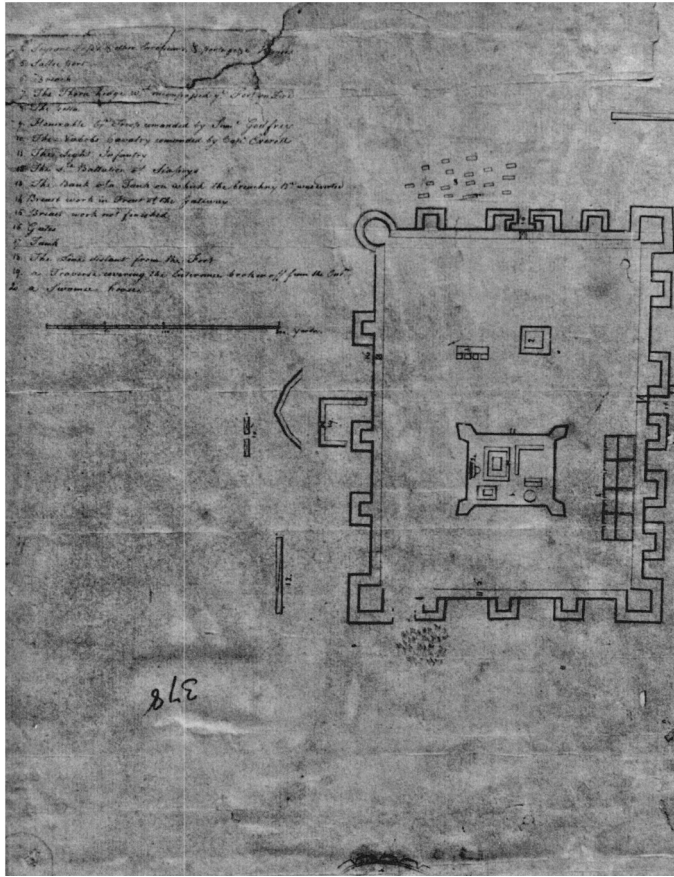


Fig. 1. Military siege maps of *poligar raja* fort. The siege maps of the Panjalamkurinchi fort were drawn during the 1801 *poligar* wars. The map on page 11 was produced by James Welch and was included in the appendix of his book of military reminiscences (1830:63). The map on page 12 comes from the Tamil Nadu Archives' map collection and was drawn by an unknown military cartographer. (Courtesy of the Tamil Nadu Archives)

side. Both the colonial reports and the folkloric sources inform us that under the *poligar raja* administration, the Pallar men were held as bondage-laborers to perform the most arduous agricultural labor. They were traded or mortgaged as property by the upper castes, and some were said to be the actual slaves of the *poligar* (Lushington 1800). The Pallar women were recruited or press-ganged into construction projects and were often the victims of physical abuse (Vannamamalai 1971). Their daily loud and coarse nocturnal brawls disturbed the palace's peace, and despite their essential service, the *poligar raja* expelled them en masse deep into his densely overgrown wastelands. As a result of their loud protest that their new settlement area was uninhabitable, the *poligar raja* is said to have magnanimously sent his laborers to assist in the clearance of the land (Subramaniadurai 1954). The resettlement proved timely. Their new quarter (named Avaramkadu), which was buffered by thick undergrowth, remained intact and

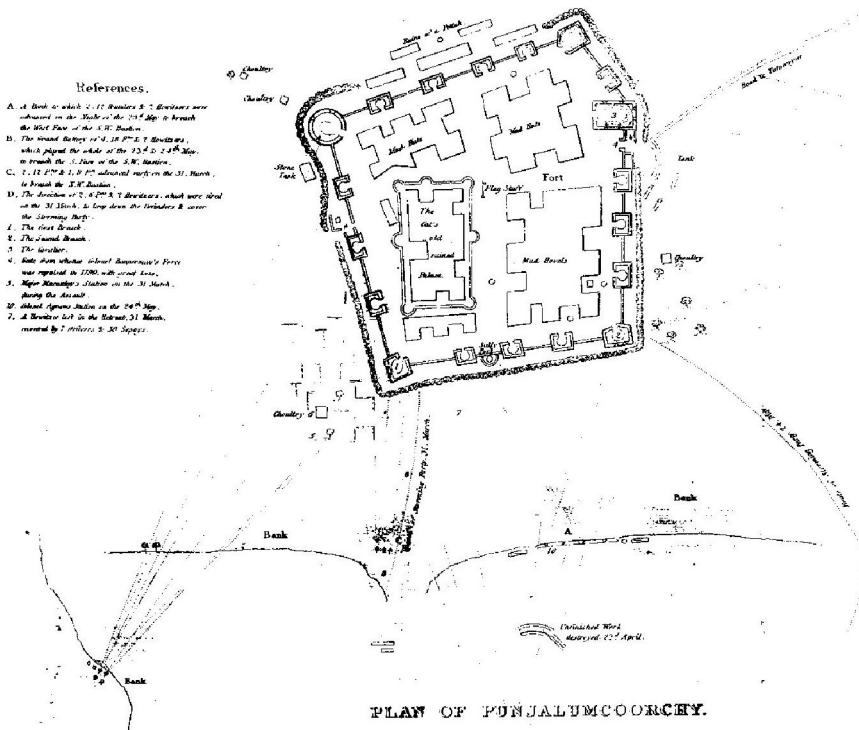


Fig. 1 (Continued)

thrived, while the village of Panjalamkurinchi was devastated by successive poli-gar raja wars, and eventually ceased to exist.

A small *aggaragarum* (the Brahmin quarter), which had two wells and twelve households was said to have been located outside the southern exterior gate (Subramania-durai 1954). This gateway was used as the fort's main entranceway, as it faced the coast-to-coast roadway that cut through the *palayam*, linking the eastern Coramandal regions with the western Malabar. The Brahmins of the *palayam* were largely employed as priests by the Subramaniam temple located alongside the *aggaragarum*, and the Chellaianman temple located near its northern entrance. They also managed the large *choultry* (Fig. 2), located within the fort's inner courtyard. This catered exclusively to the Brahmin pilgrims from Kerala en route to the venerated Siva temple at Ramaswaram.

For a *palayam* that was located on a flat and parched zone of Tinnevely, the Panjalamkurinchi fort, during its heyday, was surrounded by a number of water reservoirs. These reservoirs served domestic, irrigation, and ritual demands as well as those of the travelers and pilgrims. Suppacone recalls that there were three major irrigation ponds on the southwest corner of the fort, and [two] others on the western side (Subramania-durai 1954). One of these ponds was used as a public fountain (*urani*). Moreover, the water from the western pond flowed through the canals and fed the four brick-lined *toppaculam* successively through slushes. Three of these were reserved for the major shrines in the *palayam*, while the

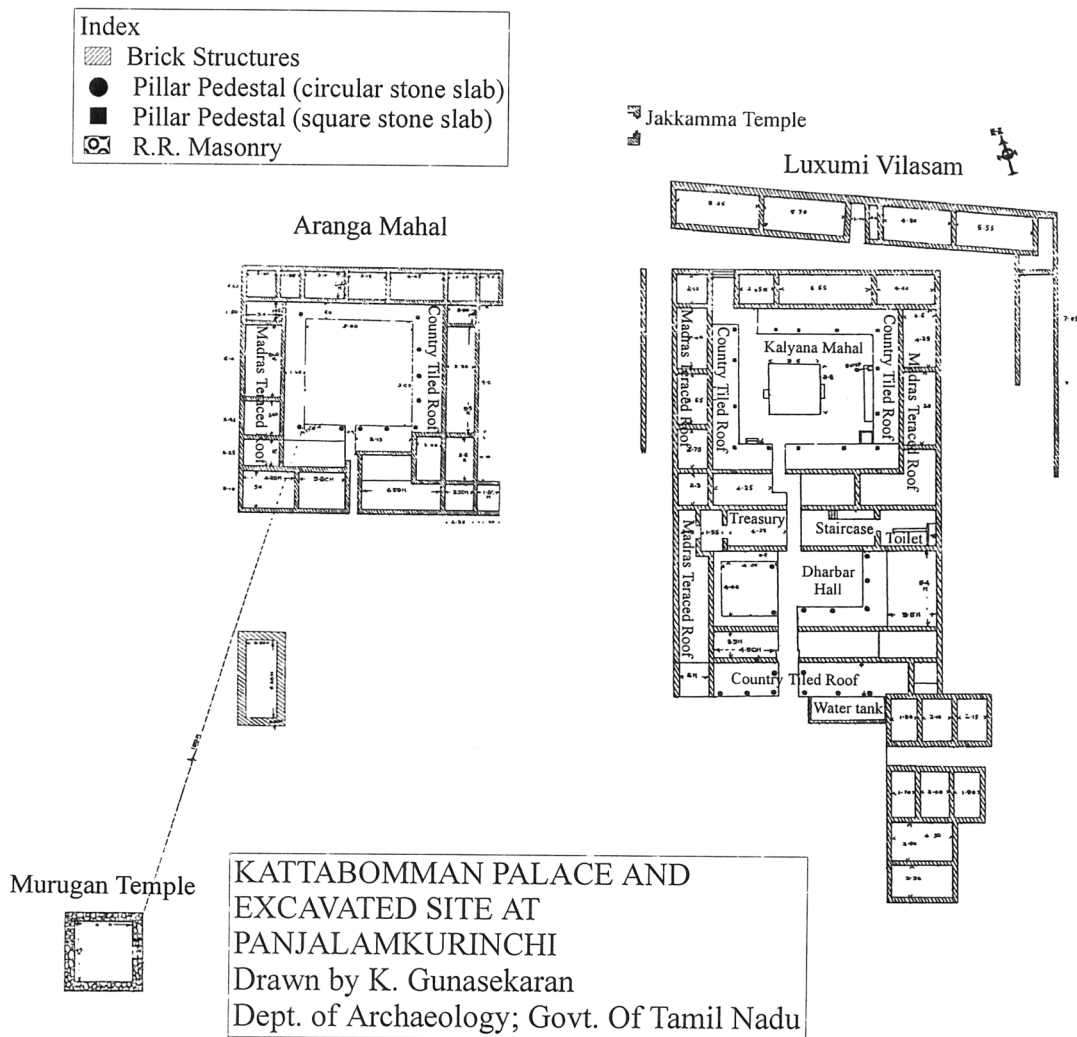


Fig. 2. Map of Kattabomma Nayakar's excavated palace.

fourth, lined only on three sides, functioned as an elephant bathing pool. There were two large public pools (*niravi*), one along the north side and the other in front of the southern entranceway, to serve pilgrims and travelers. The bird's-eye view of Welsh's siege map confirms that the fort's outer perimeter was surrounded by a number of man-made water reservoirs some of which may have doubled as defense works. The canals outside the western walls made that area unfit for habitation. However, the siege maps reveal that there were a number of public buildings on the other three sides, with a bazaar along the eastern outer gates. The archival sources also inform us that this bazaar, or *pettah*, as it was known, had 20 "boutiques" in 1801.

Before the final conflict Panjalamkurinchi was situated in a junction that linked five major routes of the period, linking the towns of Tinnevely, Tuticorin, and

Madurai via Ettayapuram. Its central location linked the pilgrim routes to Ramaswaram, and the inland trade routes from the European-held port city of Tutukurin. Large quantities of dried and salted fish were produced for the interior markets, as well as chanks, mother-of-pearl, and other sea products, which would have passed through Panjalamkurinchi (Welsh 1830). Through this proximity, Panjalamkurinchi was the primary source of meat (goat or sheep) for the European garrison stationed in Tuticorin. Being situated along the main pilgrim route from Kerala to the major shrines in Tamil Nadu, especially Ramaswaram, Panjalamkurinchi possessed a number of charitable travelers' inns or *choultries* along the north and south sides of its outer walls.

The *palayam* had sufficient water reserves to undertake both *nunjah* (irrigated rice) and *punsey* (dry grain) cultivation on a larger scale than any of its immediate neighbors. However, the overall *nanjai* cultivation in this dry zone was marginal, and was largely held as the private (*punna*)⁴ lands of the poligar raja, together with the smaller *jivatam*⁵ lands of his pikemen or those under the Vellala and Reddi cultivators. Similarly, a greater part of the *punsey* cultivation was also assigned as revenue-free *jivatam* to *sevakar* or pikemen.

Consequently a greater portion of Panjalamkurinchi's net land revenue of approximately 66,000 *chakrams* was alienated from the poligar raja's public treasury. This may also partly explain the frequent arrears and the diminished capacity of this poligar raja in paying his *kist* punctually, thereby earning the ire of a succession of collectors. Suppacone briefly mentions a banana plantation (located on the western side of the fort's exterior) and the well-irrigated flower garden of Kedu Vidulu Nayakar⁶ (along the northeast side of the fort's exterior), which formed green patches around the fort's outer perimeter. These would, no doubt, have catered to the immediate ritual demands of the nearby temples. The etching in Welsh's *Military Reminiscences* suggests that the original fort might have stood on elevated ground for better defense and drainage purposes (Fig. 3). Suppacone's citation of a larger outer fort encompassing a smaller inner one is also diagrammed in the two military siege maps (Fig. 1), drawn during the 1801 poligar raja rebellion. The map by Colonel James Welsh looks accurate in its outer dimensions, and shows what he describes as an “irregular parallelogram,” with a dimension of 500 by 300 feet⁷ (Welsh 1830). The other siege map, catalogued as map number 378 in the Tamil Nadu archives, was drawn by an unknown military cartographer. It contains a more detailed diagram of the interior structures of the fort, but unfortunately some of its valuable captions are missing, due to careless handling and the ravages of time.

Whereas the princely fortifications were built out of large granite blocks, the oral history narrates that the outer walls of the poligar raja's fort were built using a specially prepared brew called *patha-neer* (a blend of palmyra palm fruit juice and rangi paste) mixed with mud (Siramcheevi 1959). It was considered to be, in many ways, superior to stone-based construction, and provided a measure of hardness and durability to withstand prolonged artillery barrages. It also allowed for speedier repairs, even in the midst of a full-scale conflict. Suppacone's account informs us that the fort was made of two closely built walls joined at the top, with the resulting narrow gap stuffed with rice straw, husks, millet chaff, and bulrushes (Subramaniadurai 1954). This provided the wall with a shock-absorbing property, which aided in withstanding continuous artillery poundings without spewing

TABLE I. A REVENUE ESTIMATE OF THE JIVATUM AND PUNNA LANDS OF PANJALAMKURINCHI

NANJAI		PUNSEY				JIVATAM TOTAL OF NANJAI AND PUNSEY
Nanjai seed in kottais ¹⁷	Poligar's share	Estimated value	Punsey hire	Parava ¹⁷ Korukam	Seval ¹⁷ seed in Kottai	Total punsey Srotiyam ¹⁷ and chack or ready money collection
Ct. M. M. 825 00	Ct. M. 4125 00	Cchs ¹⁷ f.c. 6600 00	large $724\frac{1}{16}$ small $591\frac{1}{4}$	1556 00	Ct. M. M. $1124\frac{1}{2}$	Cchs. f. c. 8130 00 Cchs f. c. 39058 3 12



Fig. 3. A sketch of the Panjalamkurinchi fort (Welch 1830).

deadly stone chips, a major cause of casualties. Another oral source states that the outer wall, which was vertical to the exterior, was about twelve feet in height,⁸ and had rows of battlements lining its topmost reaches (Siramcheevi 1959). It had a narrow parapet measuring three feet in breadth running alongside the battlements, which allowed two men at a time to pass sideways. The interior wall then sharply sloped inward (see Fig. 4). This served to trap a scaling party of attackers on the narrow ridge, who, unable to maintain the momentum of their assault, thereby became targets for the defenders beneath, armed with their muskets and 18- or 20-foot razor-sharp pikes.

The poligar raja forts, unlike the granite-lined, deeply hewed, and water- (or sewer-) filled moats of the princely rulers, were usually surrounded by a thick thorny hedge called *Kaval Kadu* (barrier bush). This living cockspur barbed fence was usually grown from an *illanthi* bush⁹ (Welch 1830). The British soldiers' first

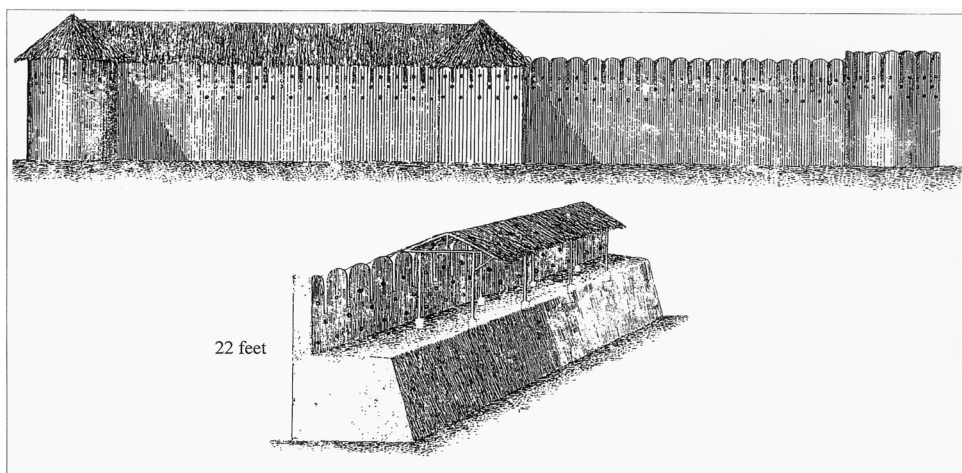


Fig. 4. Sloping interior wall of a typical poligar raja's fort.

impressions, when they saw the exterior defense work of this poligar raja, were that the fort was quite unimpressive. They compared it to a backyard cabbage patch or “kail-yard” with a dyke above it (Welsh 1830). Much to their dismay, this homely appearance was treacherously deceptive. The fort’s resistance proved to be formidable, as can be seen in the siege maps, which were prepared in order to catalogue the fort’s defenses. The two military maps indicate that the main southern gateway was fortified by double walls and the northern entrance was reinforced with defense works. The eastern gate was flanked and protected by two closely built bastions, and both maps show a sally-port¹⁰ on the swampy western side. A recent article by Lewis and Patil about the Bedar caste poligar raja forts in Chitradurga province tells us such trapezoidal mud-curtain walled forts with bent entrances, along with use of ditches and dense thorn hedges as defenses, are not unique to Panjalamkurinchi but extend all the way to central Karnataka (2003).

Defending the fort’s outer walls were the five large bastions of various shapes along its corners, with gun ports for batteries, interspersed with small square turrets of uniform size at regular intervals. One of the larger bastions, which defended the northwest corner, was estimated by Welsh to be a square block of 15 feet, which could hold about 40 defenders (Welsh 1830). Along the northern side of the fort’s outer compound were the houses of the *vakeel* Sivasubramaniumpillai and the heads of the militia, Veera Maniyakarar and Nagarasu Maniyakarar. Their brick and *chunam* (lime) plastered *karai-veedus* were a striking contrast to the neighborhood mud and thatched dwellings, which by 1799 were densely clustered inside the outer fort. They had been built haphazardly, with regard only to their owner’s needs or convenience (Subramaniadurai 1954).

There were a large number of wells located within the fort compound that would have provided the defenders with an ample water supply in the event of long sieges. The possession of a private well within the compound was a proclamation of its owner’s high esteem, a mark of honor. The chief Brahmin pundit Gurukal Iyyah had his own (located on the western side, opposite the inner fort), as did the *vakeel* (which was near his dwelling). His militia commander, Poona Maniyakarar, and the poligar raja’s near relative, Mappilai Nayakan, both had their individual wells on the south side of the outer fort’s courtyard (Subramaniadurai 1954).

Within this compound, the TNA map shows two long rectangular blocks of differing sizes, which could be taken to be stables that housed the poligar raja’s collection of elephants, camels, and horses. This is supported by Suppacone’s testimony, which relates that the larger one was in fact an elephant *mahal*. However, Suppacone locates this on the northern side of the inner fort, while the TNA map shows it situated on the southern side, near the main entrance. The faded caption on the TNA map states that the shed, subsequent to the fort’s capture, was used as barracks by Toposis (dark-skinned Indo-Portuguese), Portuguese, and other (non-British) Europeans of the Company’s contingent. Suppacone also gives the rough bearings of the poligar’s horse stable (*Kudira-layam*), which he recollects as having been stationed north of the elephant *mahal*. This oral evidence fits the smaller rectangular structure depicted in the TNA map, facing the north-south axis near its eastern entrance. The Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology, during their 1970 excavations, had also unearthed a foundation at this location. It



Fig. 5. Ancestral stones of the Panjalamkurinchi military household. (Courtesy of the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology)

was recorded as a “rectangular building (facing south) with an elevated platform on its northern side,” with evidence of square pillars running through its center. They had misinterpreted it, and marked it down as a “temple” (Nagaswami 1974). East of the elephant *mahal* was another prominent feature of this fort, a large pigeon tower. This public edifice, apart from being a focus of leisure, was also a fixture in Indian princely architecture and as such, a visible symbol of power.

The archaeological report confirmed Suppacone’s affirmations of an open live-stock pen near the eastern entrance of the inner fort. The pen had granite posts for cattle and sheep, as well as rough stone pegs to tie down the palace elephants. Along the eastern perimeter of the fortress mound, the excavators found numerous roughly sculptured boulders, hidden by overgrowth. These rocks, classified as “ancestor stones” (Fig. 5), may have been the objects of the poligar raja family’s domestic rituals. The images engraved in these rocks could be considered to be “group portraits” of the military household, one of which shows a former poligar with his co-wives, surrounded by peons wielding eighteenth-century firearms.

Inner Fort

Suppacone maintains that the inner fort had entrances on only three sides—north, south, and east. Its shape was considered to be more square than rectangular, with the dimensions of a three-quarter chain¹¹ along its north–south axis, and a three-quarter to one chain along its east–west axis. Its height during the 1801 campaign was stated to be as tall as two men, or approximately twelve feet. Two siege maps (Fig. 1) also show the outline of the inner fort with defense works surrounding the poligar raja’s living quarters.¹² Suppacone’s description also refers to a large chenchai plant situated on the western side of the palace (Subramaniadurai 1954:17). Although it may seem trivial, this obscure detail, nevertheless, more than any other, symbolizes the aggressive posture of this *palayam*. In fact, the garlands

made from chenchai blossoms were traditionally presented as conquerors' wreaths, and adorned those who had seized the enemy's cattle (*Nerai Kavarthal*)—the first act in the declaration of open war in accordance with the norms of traditional South Indian politics.

The Palace Complex

The poligar raja's palace with its ruined inner walls is faintly visible in the sketch provided by Welsh. The site, which lay buried over a century and a half, was unearthed in 1970 by the Tamil Nadu state archeology department. Their brief published report records that the entire site was discovered under a large earthen mound that covered nearly 35 acres thickly overgrown with bushes (Nagaswami 1974).

The TNA map outlines two major buildings within the poligar raja's inner fort. The East India Company records had listed these buildings as the poligar's "little bungalow" and the large chaultry. According to both Jagaveerapandian and the popular historian, Siramcheevi, the poligar's "palace" included a private residence called Luxumi Vilasam, and an adjoining public structure named Aranga Mahal (Jagaveerapandian 1954; Siramcheevi 1959).

From the map of the excavation, it seems that the central portion of the poligar raja's residence may have been a multistory brick structure, and the rest, a single story with a "Madras tiled roof." Its cramped and compact interior bears little resemblance to our ostentatious image of an Indian raja's palace, but seems, at first glance, similar to a prosperous urban upper-caste house of that period. Archeological data indicates that it was built upon a pre-existing and much humbler mud brick structure. The house was oblong in shape, and its design could be classified as a "Madras type house" favored by the wealthier Brahmins and upper castes of Tamil country. By local standards it might be seen as an imposing building, albeit in a period when most domestic habitations were little more than mud-plastered thatched huts or shacks.¹³ Its walls were of brick and lime or *chunam* plaster, with flat and country tile roofing. The flat roof suited the moderate rainfall of this region, and permitted outdoor sleeping during the hottest months. The front entranceway was flanked on both sides by the typical (teak or rosewood) pillared, elevated portico or *thinai* (Suppramaniadurai 1954). On the eastern side, right below the portico, a rectangular brick-lined pit was located about half a meter in depth, lined with lime plaster (Nagaswami 1974). The archaeological department's report identified this as a grain storage pit, but it is more likely that it was a water tub used for washing feet before entering the premises, as is customary in this part of the country.

In the opinion of the archaeologist Nagaswami, who headed the 1970 excavations, a visitor would have to first pass through an entranceway facing west at the southern end of the complex, flanked by three rooms on either side. Then, upon turning right, he would have faced the palace's elevated portico. Here the visitor would have remained until he was summoned or met by the poligar raja. The residential quarters faced south, providing the occupants with a cool southern breeze in the hot and dry season, while blocking the cold northern breeze of the wet season (Subrahmanyam 1938). If the visitor was granted permission to enter the premises, he would have walked along a narrow passage (*nadai*) sloping down to-

ward a closed courtyard, which served as the audience or *darbar* hall, an essential part of the palace’s public ceremonial space.

According to an excavator’s report, it was the “most impressive” part of the palace complex. It had a raised square platform with stone steps on the western side measuring 4 m by 4 m. The eastern side of this raised platform was decorated with ornamental moldings and had a row of sockets for oil lamps. The platform was floored with small square bricks and coated thick with a brew made primarily of fine lime powder and raw egg white, which, when polished, glistened like white marble. It had two stone bases near both ends to hold wooden pillars. There is a narrow “open square bracket-shaped” passageway also paved with fine limestone mortar.¹⁴ On the eastern side of the platform runs the north–south corridor. On the other side of the north–south corridor, facing the ornamental side of the raised square platform is a 5.5 m by 5.5 m hall also flanked by two rectangular platforms that join at right angles to make a single continuous raised platform on the eastern and southern side of the hall. This was meant for participants or audiences, was open to the sky, and had six stone posts to hold wooden pillars.

It was in this cramped, dim, lamp-lit room that the reigning head of the Kattabomma household, including the last Kattabomma Nayakar (1760–1799) sat in state and presided over his princely rituals (see Figs. 6 and 7). Although tiny in comparison with contemporary princely *darbar* halls of that period, during its prime the audience hall in the Kattabomma Nayakar household was splendidly decorated with hand-painted frescoes.

The excavator’s report informs us that among the masonry debris was the square platform of the audience, or *darbar*, hall. Debris included ornamental moldings in lime plaster with painted designs showing the likeness of a human face in the midst of floral and geometric designs. There was an ornamental molding done in plaster in the form of a big lotus. All these decorations underscore the ceremonial significance of this room as a centerpiece of domestic and state rituals; it also functioned as a private audience hall where the poligar raja held private consultations with members of his inner circle, and entertained important visitors.

The adjoining room on the northwest side of the corridor might have been used as a strong room or “treasury,” which would have also held the associated ritual paraphernalia. Just outside the *darbar* room on the northeast side of the corridor facing the treasury room was a staircase leading to the upper floor. In the nearby room located farther east was an indoor squat toilet. It was a novel bucket flush privy that may have been a state-of-the-art convenience,¹⁵ where the flushed waste matter was carried outside by drains and emptied into a closed cesspit (Fig. 8). The narrow corridor then made two sharp perpendicular turns, thereby effectively blocking the view of the poligar raja’s private quarters from those in his hallway. Beyond it lay the central courtyard, *mutram*, or *Kalyana Mandapa*, which was open to the sky.

The entire room is 10.8 m by 10.8 m. In the middle of this open courtyard is a 3.8 m by 3.8 m square platform surrounded by a passageway linking the north–south corridor on its eastern side. This is, in turn, flanked on all sides by a raised portico supported by wooden pillars mounted on stone bases. The central platform, the enclosing platform, and the flooring were plastered with fine limestone mortar. The square central platform is unusual, because it is not paved with the



Fig. 6. Ruins of the *darbar* hall (top) and details of the front base of the chaultry adjacent to the poligar raja's palace (bottom), Panjalamkurinchi. (Courtesy of the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology)



Fig. 7. Kattabomman Nayakar holding *darbar*, in a scene from the film *Veerapandia Kattabomman*.

usual brick, but packed with loose earth. This courtyard has facilities for washing hands and feet and a sump with a covered drain to flush out wastewater. This is where all household rituals, including wedding ceremonies, took place. The loose earth in the central platform was meant to anchor the marriage pandal, which is something common to all Hindu weddings. The only difference being, according to oral as well as ethnographic accounts such as Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of South India*, the traditional Nayakar pandal resembles a dome-shaped nomadic shack. But today the average Nayakars have significantly “Sanskritized” their rituals, except for the quintessential wailing of the *urumi* drums, which are stroked rather than beaten. The Nayakar women also do not adorn themselves with Hindu marriage necklaces, or apply the red vermilion marks to their foreheads to indicate their marriage status. Most do not employ priests, and opt for their own caste ritual specialist called *pujari* Nayakar. The original excavations did not find many artifacts as everything that could be salvaged had been long carted away. This included the wooden door frames; today only their empty sockets remain.

The Kalyana Mahal is surrounded by a row of 13 rooms of various sizes, ranging from 2.6 m by 2.3 m to 2.6 m by 6.55 m, and all have plastered floors. The north–south corridor ends just outside the Kalyana Mahal, and just opposite this, on the northern end of the Aranga Mahal Palace is a row of four large rectangular rooms separated from the big palace complex by the east–west corridor. This building is built on a slant and their rooms vary in size from 2 m by 4.8 m and 2 m by 5.7 m. One of the rooms had traces of ash found during the initial excavation and this, along with a raised platform (*tattu*), to keep pots and pans, and



Fig. 8. Squat toilet with drains at the Panjalamkurinchi Palace. (Courtesy of the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology)

the remains of a cooking oven, suggests its function as a common kitchen for the poligar raja's household. As in all traditional dwellings, many of these rooms at the northern end of the house may have served as granaries and storehouses for provisions.

At a distance of five meters west from the living quarters was a square building, identified in various sources as "the *choaultry*." It had a central court, with stone pillar bases in the center and mud flooring. Running around the court was a



Fig. 9. Terracotta lamps unearthed from the Panjalamkurinchi Palace. (Courtesy of the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology)

square indoor terrace, followed by a number of rooms of varying dimensions. The central court had an entrance at the south. The front face of the building had platforms (or *thinai*) flanking the entrance, their bases decorated with ornamental moldings (Fig. 9). In one room located on the eastern side of the building, an earthen trough was found in a damaged condition. A few pieces of a porcelain plate were also recovered from the same area.

Apart from the demolished structure of the palace, pieces of weaponry from the battles successively fought in 1799 and 1801 were found. These included a number of cast-iron and stone (granite) cannonballs found scattered around the palace premises. The one found embedded in the northern wall of the *darbar* room may well have been fired from close range soon after the fort's capture, as a symbolic triumph. A few cannonballs, along with broken eighteenth-century beer bottles and swords, were found dumped in a nearby old well (Fig. 10). Other scattered artifacts are more personal and perhaps once belonged to the members of the poligar raja's household. These included earthen lamps, broken pots, and abandoned terracotta dolls (Figs. 9, 10, and 11).

Nearby, upon the foundations of the original Jaccamma shrine, stands the newly rebuilt Tottiyar Nayakar place of worship. Its eighteenth-century antecedent was set in the palace's backyard and flanked on the other side by the inner defense

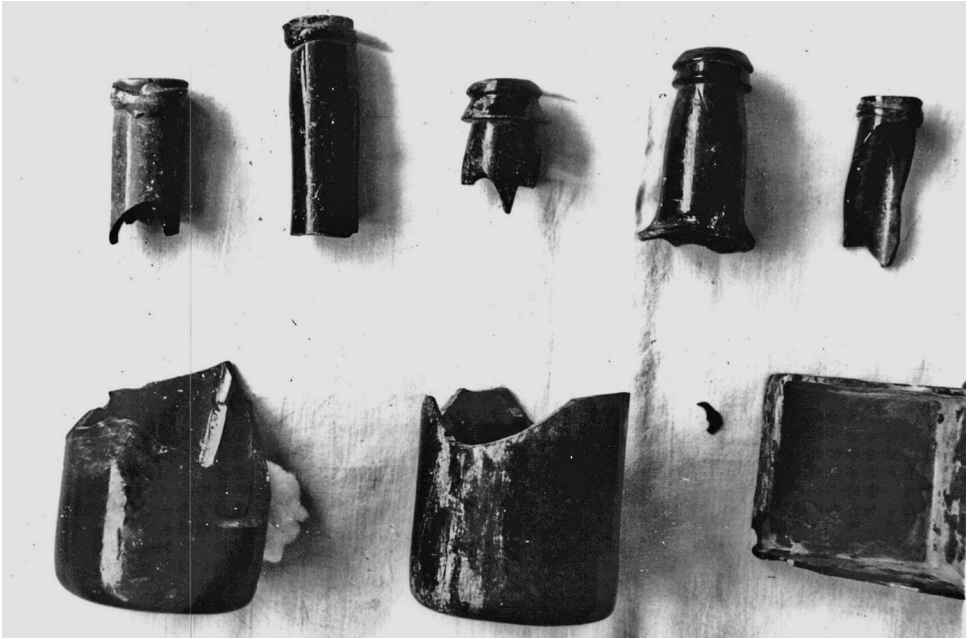


Fig. 10. Broken pieces of late eighteenth-century beer bottles (top) and pieces of broken chinaware, bottles, pottery and terracotta figures, cannonballs, and a palace key (bottom), Panjalamkurinchi. (Courtesy of the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology)



Fig. 11. Poligar raja's household pottery from the Panjalamkurinchi Palace. (Courtesy of the Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology)

wall (Jagaveerapandian 1954). The TNA map identified this as the “swami house.” Its tiny diagram depicts this as a domed structure built upon a platform, thereby giving the mistaken impression of a large lingam. The dome was but a cover for its inner sanctuary or *karu-arrai*. It was meant to mimic the shape of a nomadic shack of twigs and leaves, but was constructed out of bricks and mortar. Here, there seems to be an absence of a shed in the public space, indicating that its worshipers, as in any village shrine, would have stood in the open.

Just as its unusual architecture marked out the shrine as different from the rest of the Tamil-speaking community's shrines, its placement served that purpose as well. Whereas all the neighborhood mother-goddess shrines faced northward, the Jaccamma shrine faced east (Manikam 1991). Its secluded setting was no accident, and as with other Tottiyar Nayakar places of worship, its surroundings would have been out of bounds to all, including Brahmins. All rituals would have been conducted in the strictest privacy. Despite this, certain peculiarities of the private rites of the poligar household can be extrapolated from accounts of present-day practices. Its litany, just like today, would have been in colloquial Telugu, and on special occasions, speaking within its precincts in any other tongue, including their own vernacular, Tamil, was strictly forbidden (Manikam 1991). The loud hypnotic wail of the *urummi* drums would have accompanied all services.¹⁶ Unlike typical Hindu shrines, there were no central anthropomorphic icons and all ceremonies would have lacked the essential breaking-of-coconuts practice, a ritual common to all Hindus of South India (Jagaveerapandian 1954).

The primary focus of veneration here would have been a simple bamboo basket placed on top of a tripod. The basket would have contained items associated with the goddess, such as red palm-leaf earrings, *pasi* or *kadugu* bead necklaces, and a rattan cane (Manikam 1991). During the time of the poligar raja, it was believed that the domed sanctum contained a gold (-plated) tripod and a goddess icon of copper-gold alloy. These two sacred relics were said to have been smuggled out to Dindugal after the fall of the *palayam*, but their present fate, as

with the very credibility of this story, remains a mystery (Manikam 1991). It may have possessed a single sharp hallowed sword (it has three today), leaning against a corner (Jagaveerapandian 1954). This was another symbol of the goddess as well as being the poligar raja household's official crest.

The original shrine was destroyed during the 1801 poligar raja wars, and it, along with the rest of the fortress ruins, were laid under a mound. The colonial administration ruled the buried site out of bounds, but this only increased its local veneration. New legends began to be circulated about the valorous properties of its soil. The elders of the poligar raja's household, with justifiable pride, related that during every sivarathri in living memory, a wake was held there. This occurred in spite of the severe penalties the congregation would have faced if the authorities had been informed.

The colonial government's iron grip over Panjalamkurinchi eased only in 1946, one year before India's independence. In that year, permission was granted by the district collector for rebuilding a small concrete cupola of the shrine. This was constructed upon the existing foot-and-a-half-high round base (Manikam 1991). A decade later, the shrine was further expanded, and now, in keeping with the egalitarian Nationalist ideology of post-independence India, it functions as a multi-caste place of worship.¹⁷

TAMIL COUNTRYSIDE AFTER THE POLIGAR RAJAS RULE

In this article, apart from describing the physical layout of the poligar settlement of Panjalamkurinchi I have also touched on the key economic and social roles played by Panjalamkurinchi military households in the waning decades of the eighteenth century. The "poligar raja-service" was the major source of employment in rural Tamil country for hundreds of thousands of pikemen. The relatively modest dwellings of the poligar raja's living quarters were also an indication that much of the resources of his domain went for the upkeep of a large army of pikemen. These men belonging to Tamil and Telugu martial castes such as Kallar, Maravar, and Tottiyar were heavily dependent upon the poligar service for their livelihood. In early 1800 by compelling the poligar rajas to dismiss their pikeman the company also created massive rural unemployment for the large numbers of these warrior castes. Unable to secure alternate forms of employment they often resorted to theft and armed robbery. They were subsequently branded as criminal castes and their settlements were kept under restriction and constant vigil by the colonial police. The countryside as a result became unsafe for travelers as they were preyed upon by well-organized traveling bands of brigands who capitalized on the lack of protection in the countryside. The presence of these rural brigands looms large in colonial accounts and was given as one of the necessary conditions for the colonial presence.

The poligar raja as the dominant member of the local elite also functioned as a cultural middleman. The poligar raja as a local patron of arts was a source of employment for *deva-dasi* dancers from temple towns as well as local artisans and literary figures. With the advent of colonial rule, these former military households' ability for patronage was greatly diminished and many of these groups had to choose alternate forms of employment. This is one of the reasons why the *deva-dasi* dancers were often referred to as prostitutes in colonial writings. The cultural

and artistic slack of the Tamil courtside was picked up by the new urban centers such as Madras city, which now became cultural hubs, producing a hybrid or reinvented tradition such as *Baratha-natayam* catering to the urban “Sanskritized” and Anglicized Hindu elite.

Panjalamkurinchi, famed for its defiance during the poligar raja period, became depopulated by the colonial government, and by the mid-nineteenth century it was largely forgotten by the rest of the Tamil country. The site of the poligar raja’s fort was heavily overgrown, as it had been made into a restricted area by colonial edict. The memory of Panjalamkurinchi was resurrected by the Tamils of the Indian Nationalist movement on the eve of the independence struggle in an effort to find genuine Tamil heroes for the Congress-led Nationalist struggle. Later it also became a symbol for the Tamil Nationalist movement in their effort to carve out a separate Tamil state out of what was formally a Tamil and Telugu province of Madras. A small square concrete mock fort constructed in its proximity became a shrine for the last poligar raja of Panjalamkurinchi (poligar raja Kat-tabomma Nayakar who ironically was a member of a migrant-invader Nayakar or Tottiyar Nayakar caste and of Telugu heritage) became a pilgrimage site for Tamil Nationalists as well as a local tour stop.

NOTES

1. The proper Tamil equivalent for the term poligar raja is *kurunila mannar*, literally “kings of tiny territories,” or *chitarasar*, “little kings” (Winslow 1977:343, 766).
2. This is somewhat ironic since “the pursuit of the picturesque” as the new fashionable art movement questioned the traditional classical values including its ideals of beauty. As a revolt against the classically inspired norms of order (now ridiculed as “smoothness”), these new values sought after irregularity and ruggedness. Artists singled out hitherto neglected features of rural landscape scenery such as ruins, the poor, gypsies, lush overgrown vegetation, and exotic locations. And India, in the words of Fanny Parks (a Victorian traveler / painter who saw herself as a sort of pilgrim in search of the picturesque) has the most picturesque scenes of any country. She like other European painters and thinkers saw the subcontinent as a “land frozen in aesthetic tableau” (Ghose and Mills 2001:8–9).
3. See Tedgell 1989 and Asher 1984.
4. *Punna C* is a term used for an estate or farm of a rajah cultivated by his slaves. It may have been derived from the corruption of the Tamil word for rice-field, *panai* (Wilson 1855:398).
5. *Jivatam* or *kulichcham C* is a term used for land assigned as subsistence for a military retainer in exchange for service (Wilson 1855:301, 580).
6. It is not clear if this individual was in fact the maternal uncle of the poligar raja who was known in the Company records as Getty-Putty Nayakar.
7. Suppacone also uses the same figures, but instead of feet, his unit of measurement was *kajam*, which is roughly equal to a yard, thereby tripling its area (Suppramanidurai 1954, 17).
8. Suppacone estimates its height to have been 15 feet.
9. The branches of this plant were used by the wandering Tottiyar Nayakar pastoralists to construct the walls of their cattle pens and their small hut-like shrines.
10. Sally-port—a small, concealed, and heavily fortified gateway. It permitted the defenders to rush out and strike at will, and to withdraw before the enemy could react. Moreover, it acted as an escape hatch when defeat was certain.
11. A chain is 22 yards or a tenth of a furlong.
12. This, in Welsh’s map, is perfectly rectangular in shape, and the walls are defended by the use of seven rounded turrets. The TNA map, on the other hand, shows a square fort with four diamond-shaped turrets along its corners.
13. Robert Orme, writing in the early 1780s, referred to three kinds of South Indian houses. He stated that dwellings in dry zones were primarily built of bamboo scaffolding tied with pack-thread with roofs made of mats woven from coconut or [palmyra] palm leaves. These sheds, hastily constructed in a day, could house an entire family for six months. The better structures had mud walls hardened by the sun, which reached a height of six or seven feet. These walls

- were then topped by thatched roofs made of rushes or rice-straw. An entire house could be erected within a few days. Such huts also served the Brahmin households. The cost of these accommodations fell lightly on its owner's fortunes. During this period, high-quality bricks were widely available, but their use in private construction was considered to be an extravagance, or the owner was judged to be wealthy (Orme 1974:305–306).
14. Chunam—a cement made of limestone or shells, which, when polished, resembles the finest marble in its whiteness and gloss.
 15. A modern feature for the times, being both hygienic and relatively odorless, it constituted a significant advance beyond the indigenous toilet practices. In rural Tamil country, as with much of India, daily defecation for both sexes took place in the open fields (before sunrise or after sunset) and bottom-rinsing took place in nearby communal ponds. In urban settings until very recent times, toilets were detached and located behind the living quarters. They were either semi-permanent privy pits or squat toilets. Privy pits were usually planks securely placed across an open cesspit, with poles for support. They provided the user with a certain privacy by being enclosed in a roofless shed. Squat toilets were built by the well-to-do, and were essentially an elevated outhouse. Its flooring had a small opening on the masonry platform with foot support, and usually contained a pitcher of water for rinsing. The container for waste placed beneath was emptied and cleaned by untouchable servants.
 16. Judging from contemporary observations, this may also have induced trances and possession among a few female participants, but this is disputed by Jagaveerapandian (1954:206).
 17. The two major ceremonies which clearly define what it is to be a Tottiyar Nayakar in present-day Tamil Nadu are the chitrai festival (held during the last Friday in the Tamil month of chitrai) and Sivaratri (held in the Tamil month of masi). The former, which marks the end of the Jaccamma festival, is popularly believed to commemorate the last *pūja* performed there before it was pulled down (Manikam 1991:28). With this new patriotic interpretation of its significance, this festival (which has been held since 1975) was a multi-caste affair, and has an uncharacteristic, carnival-like atmosphere. The temple, on that day, is visited by Tottiyar Nayakar far and wide, as well as other castes from the surrounding area. This occasion is marked by cultural events and various forms of entertainment, including public debates by students about Kattabomma's character (whether he was primarily virtuous or valorous), Kattabomma plays, folk songs, and *oyl* dances by professional troupes. The festival ends climactically with a bulcart race, an invented tradition to honor the martial past.

The shrine's reclusive heritage is briefly commemorated on sivarathi (Siva's night) festival. During the span of this festival, the shrine reverts to being an exclusive Tottiyar Nayakar place of worship. This is officiated by the caste priest, Pujari Nayakar, a descendant of the priestly family who once served the poligar household. On this occasion, all participants are expected to maintain a high rate of ritual purity. In preparation for this event, the Pujari Nayakar undergoes a rigorous fast for three days. He ties on a silk mask, only removing it once during midday to take a little consecrated water (*teerthum*). Within its interior, now dimly illuminated by a single perpetual flame, all activities come to a near halt. Its air would be stuffy with smoke and the smell of incense, and no one but the pujari would be permitted to enter (Jagaveerapandian 1954:206). If this were to be interpreted as a ritualistic near-death experience, then the subsequent sivarathi could be taken to be a representation of a near-after life. On the night of the festival, the shrine, with its interiors illuminated by clarified butter lamps, the floor carpeted with fresh fruits and its entrance decked with sugar-cane booths (*pundal*), briefly transformed itself into a pastoralist's version of a cornucopic heaven.

These two major celebrations should be seen as complimentary. They, in essence, mark out the two concentric boundaries of present-day Tottiya Nayakar identity, which are, in a broader sense, fully integrated with the rest of Tamil speakers by a common heroic past, but are separated by their unique Telugu pastoral heritage.

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the turn of the nineteenth century large parts of rural South India bristled with a number of formidable small fortified settlements called *palayams*. Most of these “forts” were surrounded by hardened earthen walls, within which were private dwellings or *aranmani* (“palace”) and administrative offices of the local military households known as poligars. The poligar rajas held sway over much of South Indian countryside prior to colonial rule. By 1800 all such mud fortifications were systematically destroyed by the East India Company government in an effort to do away with all such secondary military powers. As a result very little is presently

known about these rural strong houses that once dotted and dominated the South Indian rural landscape. This article describes a reconstruction of one of the most formidable of these rural forts situated in the town of Panjalamkurinchi. It is based on Seylon's own archaeological mapping of the site, along with additional data collected from the colonial archives, military siege maps, and manuscripts containing firsthand accounts of a pilgrim who saw the fort before its destruction. Together these sources present a vivid and complete picture of Panjalamkurinchi in the late 1790s. **KEYWORDS:** India, fortifications, palaces, states, rajas, militarism, colonial, ethnohistory, East India Company.